A Doughboy Returns to France

By CORLISS HOOVEN GRIFFIS.

ALTHOUGH a week spent in and around the St. Mihiel salient and visiting forty miles of battlefields was extremely exhausting, nevertheless it could only increase our pride in the First American Army and the remarkable victory it gained here on September 12, 1918.

St. Mihiel is a name which now means so much to any American that when we turned in the direction of this city it was with an eagerness we had not heretofore experienced. We knew that there were no memories or incidents of fighting here by other forces which could compare to the deeds of our own troops.

St. Mihiel is a wreck from one end to the other. The work of reconstruction and rebuilding is proceeding slowly because it is so enormous an undertaking. Even now scarcely 60 per cent. of the houses appear to be occupied.

It was no easy matter to find a place to lodge. What had once been the main hotel of the town was still without a roof, and most of the others were in a similar plight. One which we did finally discover, however, proved to be comfortable—so comfortable, in fact, that we were not at all surprised to learn that it had been used for four years to house German officers. Many of the doors to the bedrooms have "zimmer" painted on them, and some of them even the names of the Kaiser's officers marked on the panels.

The first morning of our visit found us on our way to the northeast, through the center of the salient. It was necessary here to climb the long hill up to the level of the Heights of the Meuse, and when on a bicycle hills such as these become of prodigious moment. The first village of consequence was Chaillon, eleven kilometers or so from St. Mihiel.

We were immediately impressed with the vast respect that the inhabitants feel toward the Americans, who had released them from their captivity. The village is now in the process of rebuilding, and we stopped for lunch in a little cafe, where an old lady did the cooking over an open blaze in a great blackened fireplace. There was only one room, and the food was served direct from the fire to our table. Every doughboy has seen just such a place, and it was in this kind of a primitive but hospitable atmosphere that many Americans found lasting friendships with the French. The old hostess, quite overcome with the idea of entertaining Americans for a meal, showered us with her very best.

The country we had traversed since leaving St. Mihiel had been rough and wooded. In places it was of impassable density; this was another reason why it was miraculous for the Americans to pinch off this salient so quickly and with such apparent ease. All along the road we now found evidences of German occupation, dugouts and shelters of every description. At one place there had been a German cemetery, and although the last of the bodies had been removed there were still many large and elaborate monuments.

There are many German cemeteries on the promontory here and there, but near the station was a large one which was unusual because practically all of the black crosses carried French inscriptions, showing with what consideration the French had buried the enemy and how they have since taken care of the graves even as they do those of their own soldiers. Yet one thing which we have noticed on all German graves distinguishes them from those of any other nationality. Each Teuton grave is marked with a cross, as are the French, the English or American; however, with the German it is the Iron Cross of war.

Leaving Vigneulles, we continued on our progress across the battlefield through St. Benoit and Beney to Thiaucourt. On the crest of a commanding hill outside of Thiaucourt is the American cemetery. After having spent several days roaming over this fighting area of the American army it gave us a peculiar sensation suddenly to come upon that part of the ground dedicated to those who made the supreme sacrifice. Five thousand white crosses shine out their message here, with Old Glory silently, tenderly floating above. All of the American graves that were originally scattered throughout the battlefields of the salient have been gathered together here into the one great cemetery, and although it is not completed as yet it will be beautiful in the years to come.

The road to Flirey goes through the famous Mort-Mare Wood, and here the front line trenches of the enemy had seemed impregnable. Nevertheless they were taken expeditiously enough by the American Eighty-ninth Division in the great advance of the first day. Entering Flirey itself the first object to strike your eye is the magnificent monument which has been erected by the French of Lorraine in honor of the American army. In the midst of this desolated village it was touching to find that the French sense of gratitude to the United States was such that this monument had been erected before the village itself could again fairly be considered habitable. With a large bas-relief of two American soldiers the face of the monument carries the inscription "La Lorraine aux Etats Unis"—"Lorraine to the United States." The shaft also displays a list of the American divisions together with a brief account of the battle participating in the St. Mihiel offensive.

From Flirey we continued to Beaumont, some 1,250 feet high, had dominated the whole of the St. Mihiel salient and particularly had it been a source of annoyance to the Americans intrenched in the marshy ground at its base. It was an admirable observation post for the Germans and had been heavily fortified. It was toward this tremendously formidable hill that the First Division directed the advance on September 12, and very shortly after it fell into American hands.

The predominating impression which this historic sector gives now to an American, however, is not of war or even of the memories of war. It is the earnest, heroic enthusiasm of the French people, who are straining every possible effort to rebuild their homes before the winter comes. The fields and gardens in this part of the country have received first attention, while the people lived, as in fact they are still living, in little wooden shacks resembling old barracks. Yet by this time the people have had an opportunity to turn to the towns, and every one is busy upon a new home—the villages are literally humming with labor. Slowly but steadily

The ruins at Xivray.

thence to Seicheprey. We had been wanting to see Seicheprey for months, since this little hamlet held for each of us a peculiar sentiment. For here took place the first real test of American troops in the war. This town and the surrounding sectors had been held by the First Division from January 21 to April 5, 1918. Then it was relieved by the Twenty-sixth, the New England or "Yankee" Division. On the 20th of April the Germans launched a surprise attack on this division and carried the town. However, the boys from New England reformed and after a two day fight took back all the lost territory and demonstrated to the Germans that they were soldiers of the highest type.

In September the First Division again held this sector, and it was here that they started the victorious thrust which resulted in their capture of Montsec. Seicheprey naturally was a complete wreck during the fighting years, yet it is already so largely rebuilt that scarcely a war landmark is recognizable. Just beyond the town, where the fields now look much the same as they did before the German invasion, a little First Division monument marks the American front line.

St. Baussant we found to be almost completely destroyed. This village was wrested from the enemy by the Forty-second or "Rainbow" Division during the offensive. Here it was that the American tanks performed astonishing feats, the village falling to the advancing Americans within less than thirty minutes after the attack began. There is little here now left to see; the old chateau which formerly dominated the town remains merely a heap of crumbling walls and broken stone.

Passing through Richecourt in the direction of Xivray we came very close to the base of Montsec. This commanding hill, new communities are rising out of the vestiges of the old.

To a soldier no spot in the world can equal one of his old battlefields for conjuring up the most vivid of memories. Because of this the thoughts of more than a million Americans habitually turn toward the great battlefield of the American Army in the Meuse-Argonne offensive, and whenever possible their footsteps also turn in the same direction. It has become a new national shrine.

On our journey north from St. Mihiel, and long before we arrived within sight of the city of Verdun, we began to encounter traces of the great battle of 1916, when the German Crown Prince made a supreme effort to take that citadel and where his tremendous onslaught ended in French victory. On all sides of the city the hilltops present the most barren spectacle. They are covered with ghastly stumps of what were formerly abundant forests. Everywhere are shell holes—the inevitable shell holes—so many indeed that it has been impossible to fill in all or even a considerable portion of them.

The city of Verdun itself remains a picture of woeful desolation. Very little rebuilding has been undertaken here. Much of the business is being carried on in little wooden buildings resembling barracks, so that this ancient French community is in some respects a prototype of a Western mining town. Everywhere, however, are the ruins of a prosperous and historic past.

Pushing on at once to the Meuse-Argonne battlefield we sought the point where my own division, the Thirty-third, had been assigned at the beginning of the offensive. This was at the extreme right flank of the American Army, resting on

Continued from Page Twenty.